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ABSTRACT

In view of the importance of selectivity to the understanding of the interpersonal, small group, and public communication processes, this concept must be introduced into the communication classroom. This paper introduces an instructional model that simplifies the student's understanding of the four major steps involved in the selectivity process: selective exposure, attention, perception, and retention. Discussion is included regarding possible extensions of this model and suggested areas of classroom application. A diagram of the model is included. (Author/MAI)

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An Instructional Model of the Process of Selectivity

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ABSTRACT

This paper introduces a useful instructional model of the selectivity process. Given the importance of selectivity to the understanding of the interpersonal, small group, and public communication processes, it is essential that this concept be introduced into the communication classroom. The model seeks to simplify the student's understanding of the four major steps in the selectivity process: selective exposure, attention, perception, and retention. Discussion concerns possible extensions and areas of classroom application.

CS502/93

An Instructional Model of the Process of Selectivity

The purpose of this paper is to introduce a useful instructional model of the selectivity process. This process (exposure, attention, perception, and retention) has been the focus of behavioral research for some time in speech communication and other social sciences. The basic assumption of selectivity is that individuals tend to seek out, attend to, perceive, and remember that information which is consistent with previously held attitude or belief structures and, conversely, to avoid inconsistent information. As educators in the field of speech communication, we must search for the best ways in which to introduce and explain our conceptual frameworks and the results of our experimental research. It is believed that this model serves such a purpose in communication education.

Several of the basic texts in speech communication explain the selectivity process and assign to it importance for theory in the field[1]. Burgoon notes that "most people are unaware that communication is a very selective process and they are unaware that selectivity greatly affects the nature of their communication activities."[2] To the extent that educators in speech communication agree with this position and assign importance to the selectivity process, it is a phenomenon worthy of our attention in the classroom.

The selectivity model (Figure 1) has been used as an instructional aid at three major universities with great success. It aids the student in his conceptualization of each of the four "stages" of selectivity as integral parts of one process, as well as in remembering each of the stages and its function. The model can be conceptualized as four "gates" through which information must travel in order for it to be used by the individual. Each of these gates is described below.

Selective Exposure

Reinforcement and consistency theories suggest that people will choose to expose themselves to consistent and/or reinforcing information. Mills, Aronson, and Robinson[3] suggested that we do selectively choose and avoid information by such criteria. This has an important impact on communication theory since we tend to seek communication that is consistent and/or reinforcing in the interpersonal, small group, and mass communication "arenas."

The "x"s at the left of the model represent possible information available to us in the environment at any given time. As the information approaches the exposure "gate", it is funneled in such a way that we only expose ourselves to some of the information, allowing the rest to remain in or revert to the environment. For example, we may choose to expose ourselves to one particular news magazine in place of other possible magazines. In so doing we have greatly reduced the amount of information we can process. At some later date, we may choose some of the information previously rejected if we feel that such information would be reinforcing and/or consistent.

Selective Attention

Recent theorists[4] have suggested that since man's capacity to process information is limited, a selective device operates to allow only some of the information to which one is exposed to be processed. This funneling "gate" is referred to as selective attention. Again, the amount of information the indiviual is able to use becomes diminished. Dissonance theory[5] suggests that individuals will more likely attend to information that is consonant than dissonant. Considerable research has been conducted to demonstrate this phenomenon. For example, while one might have chosen to read a particular magazine, he is not likely to pay equal attention to all parts of that magazine. If he recently purchased a particular product, he is most likely to attend to those advertisements which support that behavior. To the extent that information may be of a permanent nature, it may be "re-cycled" into the store of stimuli to which one may be exposed again. (i.e. other advertisements may be seen at some other time). This re-cycling process is illustrated at the bottom of the model in the first two stages.

Selective Perception

While the previous "gates" have attempted to screen out all inconsistent stimuli, some will still be attended to. On the basis of considerable theory and research[6], it appears that individuals at this third gate will filter the information attended to in order to perceive what they want to or expect to perceive, regardless of whether such perceptions are in line with others' perceptions of reality. Thus, information quantity

is not diminished, but its content is often distorted or modified in some way.

Selective Retention

Finally, selective retention (or recall) operates as our memory to store information. That information which is non-reinforcing will likely be forgotten (or placed in long-term storage), while reinforcing information will more probably be remembered. Thus, given exposure to a two-sided message, individuals tend to remember that information which is supportive, forgetting the rest.[7] The model illustrates that while only a small amount of information is utilized, much that is perceived may be stored in memory. Thus it is possible that such information may later be recalled under some circumstances.

Discussion

No claim is made that this model answers all the questions in the area of selectivity, that it includes all neurological and biological knowledge, or that it mirrors reality exactly. It is suggested, however, that this model can stimulate discussion and aid the student in his understanding of the basic selectivity process.

Experience with the model in the classroom suggests that discussion can be profitably focused upon topics such as the following:

(1) Is the linear positioning of the four "gates" legitimate? It could be argued, for example, that perception is the first step in the selectivity process, with selective exposure, attention, and retention following.

(2) What are the variables which influence the various steps in the process? Students can be asked to investigate these variables (e.g. consistency, reinforcement) and report back to the classroom.

(3) How might the model be expanded? Different types of memory storage systems might be explored (e.g. sensory storage, short-term storage, long-term storage) and incorporated into the model.

(4) Are there perhaps other steps in the process? The model represents the popular notion of a four-stage process of selectivity. It may be that there are one or more additional "gates" through which information must travel in the selectivity process.

(5) Is it legitimate to conceptualize information as capable of being recycled? According to the model, information does not merely dissapear; rather, much information will be recycled through the selectivity gates. Students can discuss and further investigate this recycling process.

These questions (depending upon the depth and focus of the course) can be assigned for research or introduced to students for open discussion. It is hoped that through such a process this four-stage model will aid the student of communication in the conceptualization, analysis, and understanding of the selectivity process.

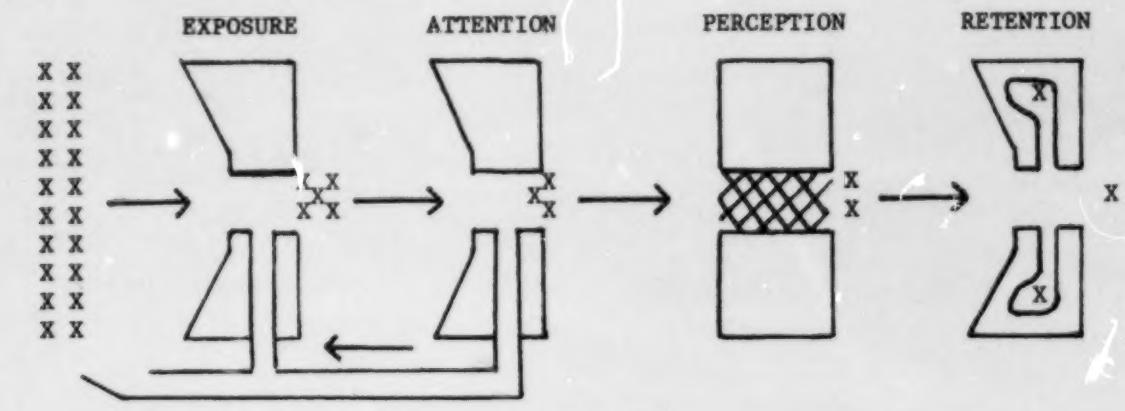

Figure 1

FOOTNOTES

[1]See, for example, Michael Burgoon, Approaching Speech/Communication (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1974); James C. McCroskey, Carl E. Larson, and Mark L. Knapp, An Introduction to Interpersonal Communication (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1971); John R. Wenburg and William W. Wilmot, The Personal Communication Process (New York: John Wiley, 1973).

[2]Burgoon, p. 152.

[3]J. Mills, E. Aronson, and H. Robinson, "Selectivity in Exposure to Information," Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology, 59 (1959), 250 - 253.

[4]See, for example, D. E. Broadbent, Perception and Communication (London: Pargamon Press, 1958) and A. M. Treisman, "Contextual Cues in Selective Listening," Quarterly Journal of Experimental Psychology, 12 (1960), 242 - 248.

[5]Leon Festinger, A Theory of Cognitive Dissonance (New York: Row, Peterson, 1957).

[6]See, for example, H. Toch and M. Maclean, "Perception and Communication: A Transactional View," Audio Visual Communication Review, 10 (1967), 55 - 77; M. D. Vernon, Perception Through Experience (London: Methuen & Company, 1970); S. Zagona and R. Harter, "Credibility of Source and Recipient Attitude: Factors for the Perception and Retention of Information on Smoking Behavior," Perceptual and Motor Skills, 23 (1966), 155 - 168.

[7]See, for example, J. M. Levine and G. Murphy, "The Learning and Forgetting of Controversial Material," Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology. 49 (1954), 23 - 28; J. T. Klapper, "The Social Effects of Mass Communication," in Wilbur Schramm (Ed.), The Science of Human Communication (New York: Basic Books, 1963).